Dylan Thomas

A Child's Christmas in Wales

EDITIONS CARREFOUR ALYSCAMPS
TORONTO, CANADA

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Dylan Thomas with his wife and infant son Llewelyn in 1942.

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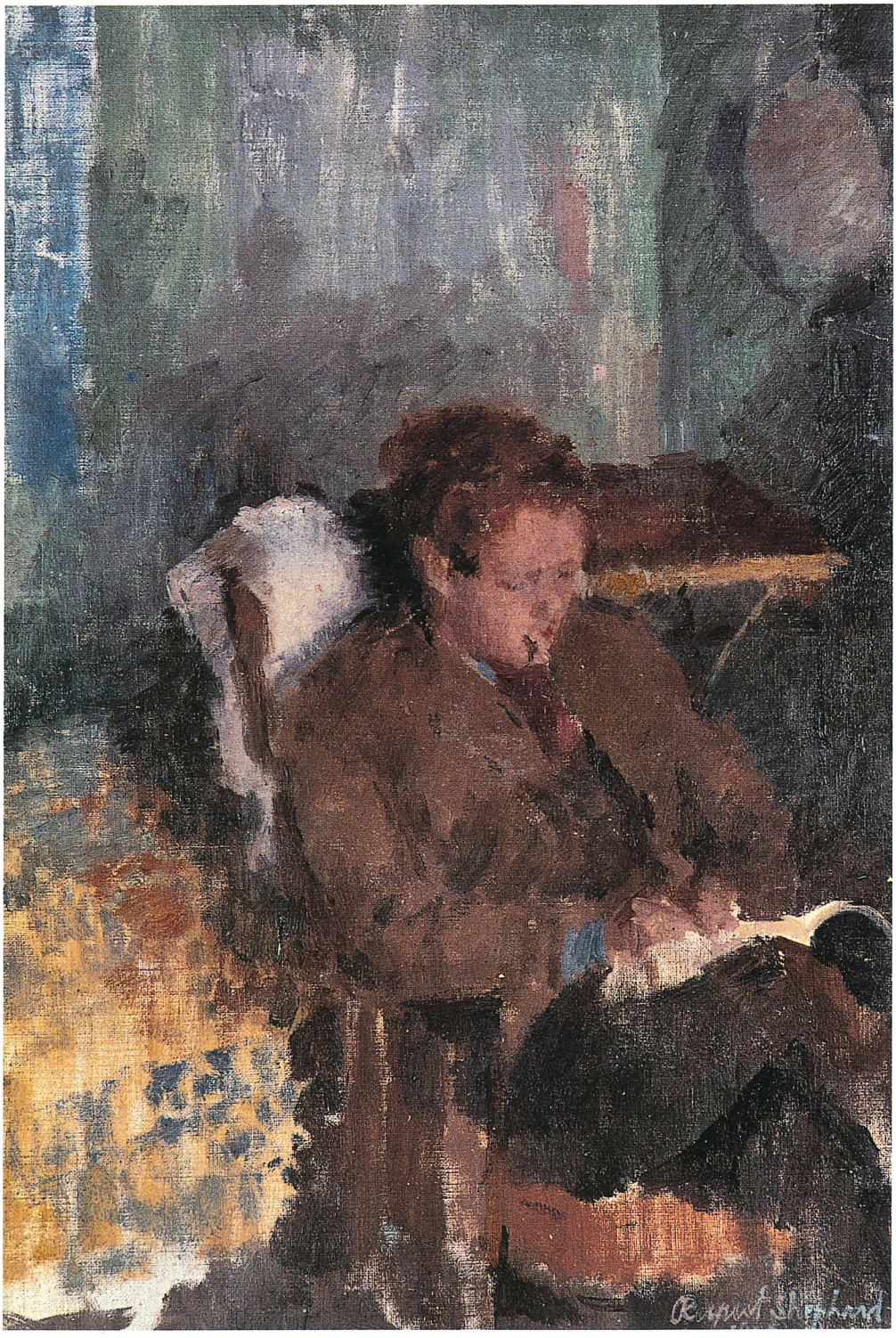

DYLAN THOMAS

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Edited, and
with a Forward
by
Karl Orend

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This publication is dedicated to Susan Davey and John Plumb.

Foreword

My discovery of Dylan Thomas dates back to my first year at the University of Liverpool. I had come to study Geography, after a mistake my Grammar School teacher led to me (and the rest of the class) getting grades too low to qualify for entry to study for a degree in English Literature. It's hard to write essays about books you've never read! In those days one chose five colleges and visited them all; they made offers based on how much they liked you and, if you made those grades you were accepted and could choose between the five. Liverpool had been fifth on my list. I never intended to go there, but my visit had such a profound impact on me that I told the admissions group that the only place I wanted to go was Liverpool. Instead of five possibilities, I only had one. I never regretted the decision. Liverpool remains my favorite city in Britain.

The education and experiences I had there were ideally suited to my needs. It was the years of the Toxteth riots, no-go areas for the police, massive unemployment and urban strife. In parts of the city unemployment reached 90%. Poverty was the norm. It was the years of Alan Bleasdale's *Boys from the Blackstuff* and terrible suffering. It is rare that anyone in the Americas has heard of the series, but in the year 2000 it was voted by the British Film Institute

seventh on the list of the hundred best television programs of the twentieth century. I wept openly when I watched it. Too close to home and too like so many people I knew and saw every day. Unlike most students I was not from a middle class background. I grew up poor. I was uneasy around intellectuals and had no idea of my own worth. I spent my entire first year thinking I was at the bottom of the class, only to find at the end of the year I had won the prize for the best course work of the year. Apart from a couple of close friends, most of my interactions were with locals, and often with the uneducated.

When I finished my degree I couldn't find a way to stay in the city I had grown to love. It broke my heart to leave. Many of my great loves in literature came from reading in the City Library, which has a huge collection of international literature. A poet and painter most dear to my heart is Adrian Henri, whom I met in a pub one night. He echoed through my Liverpool years, and every day since. Adrian was the great democratizer of poetry in Britain. His artwork and poetry bridged the gap between French high art and literature and working class factory life in a British slum.

Unable to study Literature, I signed up for a degree in Geography, which had been my third best subject at school. I skipped my best subject (History) because I felt it would be too easy. My greatest regret on leaving Wisbech Grammar School was not winning the History Prize. It was awarded to someone else, with lower grades, since I'd already won a major prize and the awards had to be spread

around. Once at Liverpool, I had to take subsidiary subjects. I chose Prehistoric Archaeology because it was close to History, and I'd enjoyed a school trip to the Grimes Graves Prehistoric Flint Mines, and liked looking at Bronze Age artifacts in Wisbech Museum. I never realized that within weeks Prehistory would become an obsession. I fought a major battle to be allowed to change my degree subject, and became the first person to graduate with joint honors in Prehistoric Archaeology and Geography and Geophysics. I was blessed to have two brilliant Heads of Department who made these years a dream. Frank Oldfield led me into the world of mineral magnetics, which would become my career at the University of Coventry, with the Natural Environmental Research Council, after I graduated. Joan J. Taylor, Reader in Prehistory, had a bigger impact on me than anyone at college. She was able to inspire me and to be a model for all that is good in learning. She was also one of the best people I ever met. So close did we become that there were rumors (unfounded) that we had an affair. I disappointed her dreadfully when I didn't take up the postgraduate degree that was on offer to me, and accept a place for a doctorate at Cambridge, under John Coles. He offered it to me after I critiqued his latest book, which forced it to be revised. From the distance of these years, if it were not pointless, I'd say I regret that decision deeply.

The Archaeology building was shared with the classics department. In a corridor one day I met a beautiful raven-haired beauty and her ginger male friend. Jacqui Jones became my lover and I loved her as one can only love once; with that passion of discovery about all that love means.

Welsh was her first language. When I visited her family home, only child like me, she spoke Welsh to her mother and English to her father. Her soul was Welsh - passionate, musical, poetic, miraculous through and through. Her friend, Roddy, became my close friend. They studied Latin and Greek together. I fit right in because I was at home in Latin ever since I decided to read about the Carthaginian wars in the original (aged fifteen) and, loving the minutiae of history, wanted to check Gibbon against the original sources. Jacqui brought writers into my life that have helped shaped who I am, and whom I admire as among the greats. Not surprisingly, given her love of history, language, and Wales, the first was John Cowper Powys and his novels *Owen Glendower* and *Porius*. He lived for a time at Corwen, which became a favorite place to visit. I believe Powys is the greatest historical novelist in the English language. He also wrote many other books that should be considered classics, especially his *Autobiography* and literary studies. Forgotten by many, Powys was thrice nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature. In 1995, I was fortunate to publish a selection of his diaries, entitled *Petrushka and the Dancer*, under the Alyscamps Press imprint. Another discovery Jacqui brought to me was Dylan Thomas, who was her favorite poet.

Dylan Thomas wrote poetry and prose, film scripts, and radio plays that have become, despite the reservations of some in the academic and intellectual communities, part of the canon of great works written in English in the twentieth century. He has a plaque in Poets' Corner in Westminster

Abbey. Thomas grew up with Welsh speaking parents and extended family that kept their language from him, supposedly for his own good. His given names were however from the *Mabinogion*, and, like other children in similar circumstances (myself included), he absorbed far more of the forbidden tongue than his family ever imagined. Dylan Thomas, whose father was an English teacher, grew to love language and music very early. He was writing poetry before he was ten. Many of his well-known poems date from his school years. Thomas's father read poetry and Shakespeare aloud to the boy before he could understand it. His mother brought him often to the local Unitarian church, where her brother was a minister, and there the language and imagery of the Bible took hold of him.

The legend of Dylan Thomas, his womanizing and the mutually destructive marriage to Caitlin Macnamara has long overshadowed his poetry and prose, and led to an undermining of nuanced biography. The violence and outrageousness of their relationship, the mutual infliction of pain, jealousy and neglect tends to detract from his acceptance as a major literary figure. Caitlin was extreme for much of her life. At the time of Dylan's death she became so violent she was sent to a mental asylum. She was also very sexually promiscuous. In Italy, at one point, locals regularly called her *puta* as she walked down the street. The couple was co-dependent and inflicted incredible pain on each other. Through it all, Dylan Thomas continued to write. In the thirties he had been associated with Surrealism, where he drew the attention of

Max Ernst, Roland Penrose and Paul Éluard, among others. He was also on the fringe of the Booster/Delta group in Paris, led by Henry Miller, Lawrence Durrell and Alfred Perlès. A series of poetry books, short stories and later scripts and sound recordings, and his work for radio, firmly established his reputation as an immensely popular writer and performer. Throughout his career, Dylan Thomas divided opinion about whether he was a great poet or a fake. Some of those who thought him great were Paul Celan, Edith Sitwell, Seamus Heaney, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Tennessee Williams and Tristan Tzara, Stravinsky and John Berryman.

Dylan Thomas' poems are frequently misunderstood. They are intensively revised and reworked. They often contain imagery and ideas well above the range of their critics. The allusions are metaphysical and visionary, with links to a great literary tradition that includes John Donne, Shakespeare, the Bible and William Blake. The horror of World War Two struck him profoundly. All his work afterwards is part of a quest for lost innocence; it also contains attempts to reconcile his English and Welsh sides. Much of his work is imbued with tremendous compassion for suffering and difference. At the time of his death he was making plans with Stravinsky to write an opera based on the story of a couple that survive a nuclear holocaust.

Because he spent so much time in the public eye, his marriage was dysfunctional, and he drank himself to death aged 39, there is an unstated belief that Thomas was a

simple wordsmith, or somehow intellectually lacking. On the contrary, he was a great theoretician of poetry and prose, and had enormous command over the English language. After Shakespeare, Thomas is the most quoted poet in England. Many of his finest pronouncements on his poetic technique come from his letters, for example those to Pamela Hansford Johnson:

"I am in the path of Blake, but so far behind him that only the wings on his heels are in sight. I have been writing ever since I was a very little boy and have always been struggling with the same things, with the idea of poetry as a thing entirely removed from such accomplishments as 'word painting', and the setting down of delicate but unusual emotions in a few well-chosen words. There must be no compromise; there is only the right word: use it…Poetry finds its own form; form should never be superimposed; the structure should rise out of the words and the expression of them." (1933).

" The greatest descriptions I know of our own earthiness is to be found in John Donne's Devotions, where he describes man as the earth of the earth, his body earth, his hair a wild shrub growing out of the land. All thoughts and actions emanate from the body. Therefore the description of a thought or action — however abstruse it may be — can be translated in terms of the body, its flesh, skin, blood, sinews, veins, glands, organs, cells, or senses.

Through my small, bone-bound island I have learnt all I know, experienced all, and sensed all. All I write is inseparable from the island. As much as possible, therefore, I employ the scenery of the island to describe the scenery of my thoughts, the earthquakes of my body to describe the earthquakes of my heart." (1933).

"Have I ever told you of the theory that all writers either work towards or away from words?... Any poet or novelist you like to think of – he either works *out* of words or in the *direction* of them. The realistic novelist – Bennett, for instance – sees things, hears things, imagines things….& then goes towards words as the most suitable medium through which to express those experiences. A romanticist like Shelley, on the other hand, is his medium first, & expresses out of his medium what he sees, hears, thinks, & imagines." (1934).

Dylan Thomas told Henry Treece (1938) that

"Very much of my poetry is, I know, an enquiry and a terror of fearful expectation, a discovery and facing of fear. I hold a beast, an angel, and a madman in me, and my enquiry is as to their working, and my problem is their subjugation and victory, downthrow and upheaval, and my effort is their self-expression."

His poetry was "hewn" and "much of the obscurity is due to rigorous compression."

"…the life in any poem of mine cannot move concentrically around a central image; the life must come out of the center; an image must be born and die in another; and any sequence of my images must be a series of creations, recreations, destructions, contradictions…Out of the inevitable conflict of images – inevitable because of the creative, recreative, destructive, and contradictory nature of the motivating center, the womb of war – I try to make that momentary peace which is a poem. I do not want a poem of mine to be, nor can it be, a circular piece of experience placed neatly outside the living stream of time from which it came; a poem of mine, is, or should be, a watertight section of the stream that is flowing all ways; all warring images within it should be reconciled for that small stop of time."

Among his prose works, one of the most popular in America has always been *A Child's Christmas in Wales*. Although one can be forgiven for imagining it was based on a memory, it was rather an uplifting story based on his imagination. Christmas had rarely been happy for Thomas, either growing up or as an adult. A more apt portrayal of his personal childhood Christmases would have been the poem *This Bread I Break*, which links Christmas and the Eucharist firmly to the "Pagan" world it replaced.

In Thomas' childhood…

"There was no sense of any shared 'homely' atmosphere," …"This was no family that went off to the seaside in the summer or played foolish games around the fire at Christmas."[1]

Thomas' father loved literature and reading aloud. He also loved to drink and look down on his less educated wife, who had coddled Dylan as a child. In many ways their relationship set a pattern for Dylan and Caitlin's intellectual dynamic, though not their emotional, physical and public ones. Many of Dylan Thomas' writings come out of his compassionate responses to the pain of others. His empathy could be almost Christ-like. Christ as a man and his Passion, and Christian imagery, are central to his work. Dylan Thomas was not a Christian. Caitlin knew this when, in a drunken rage, she smashed the Crucifix from his hospital room to the ground as he lay on his deathbed. His belief was in the interconnectedness of all things and the endless cycle of transformation that anchored pagan Welsh, but also Eastern cultures. Like many people of his background, it was as if there was a deep need for Christmas to be special and to unify the family and

[1] Lycett, Andrew. *Dylan Thomas: A New Life* (Emplacements du Kindle 591-593). Orion Publishing Group.
'It (Christmas with his family)… was not a prospect that filled him with pleasure. 'Great fun will be had by all,' he told Pamela. 'Will it, hell! We'll eat too much, I suppose, read the newspapers, sleep, and crack nuts. There will be no Yuletide festivity about it.' Lycett, Andrew. *Dylan Thomas: A New Life* (Emplacements du Kindle 1956-1959). Orion Publishing Group. Édition du Kindle.

community in his imagination, even if the reality was otherwise. In 1929, he and a friend even wrote four Christmas carols. He often wrote or submitted work for publication around Christmas. When he, on the rare occasion, did receive something that made him happy at Christmas, his joy could be childlike. In November 1946, Osbert Sitwell sent him a check for the holidays. His thank you letter ran:

"It was all Christmases and birthdays the morning of getting it … it was new shoes and sweaters for the voley river cold, and school bills paid with a flourish, and some Algerian [wine], and books I've wanted for months, and a heater for our hutch, and such happiness to think that you were thinking of us and could spare, in the taxed dark, such a very marvelous gift."[2]

The pain behind his gratitude is palpable.

Back in Liverpool and in her family home, short trip by the Ferry Cross the Mersey to Wallasey, Jacqui and I read Dylan Thomas' poems to each other in bed late at night. Her accent was Welsh and, paradoxically, further from their author's than mine. Dylan's elocution lessons had given him a rich theatrical voice suited to the BBC. So many lines and images remain with me from those days. I

[2] Lycett, Andrew. *Dylan Thomas: A New Life* (Emplacements du Kindle 4966-4969). Orion Publishing Group. Édition du Kindle.

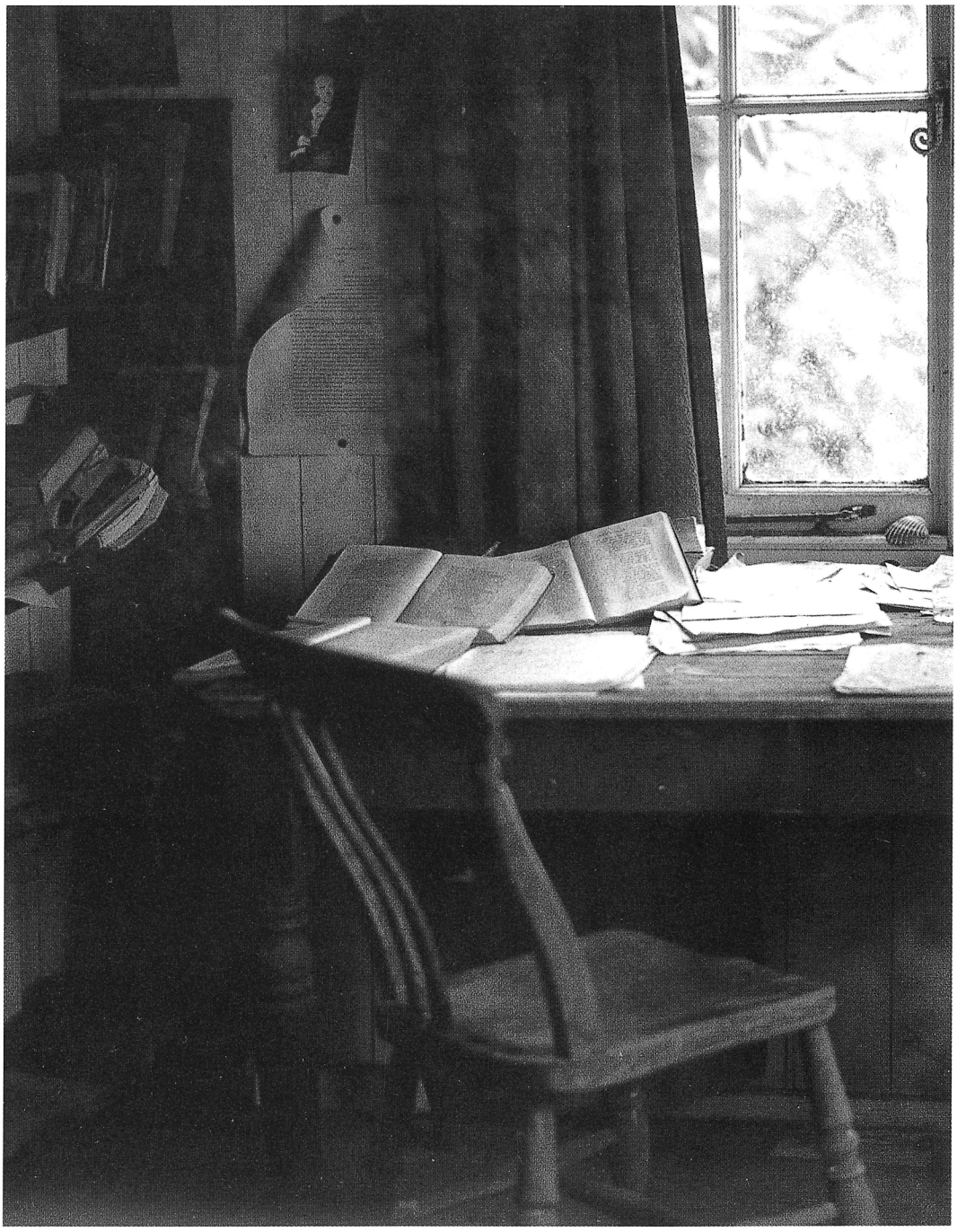
can quote whole poems by rote. It was she also who first gave me a book that contained *A Child's Christmas in Wales*. It became, like *Under Milk Wood*, one of my favorite prose works. More than twenty-five years later, after a twelve mile hike through the wilder parts of New Mexico, stalked by a bear, I was cooking salmon for my friend Tom Creegan in his geodesic dome as he told me how he has read this story to his daughter on Christmas Day every year since she was born.

Christmas has always been a special time for me. It brings reflection and pause, and so many memories of friends and lovers long lost. I recall blessed and joyous times in Prague as the snow fell, walking from Belohorska 53, downhill past the castle to Charles Bridge as the snow fell lightly. The streets were almost deserted. Communism had just fallen. It seemed as if nothing had changed since 1948. Or in Munich, late nights at the opera, wading through the snow to the Franziskana. Perhaps my happiest memory is spending Christmas with the Pueblo Indians in Taos; huge bonfires and the procession of the Madonna from the adobe church into the dark night, us all wrapped in blankets. There were also Christmas times of horrifying loneliness and deep pain. On one Christmas Day, if my friend Larry Larson hadn't opened his office on rue Croulebarbe for a couple of hours, I would have spent the whole day without speaking to a soul. I was so deep in pain I could barely make it there and sit in the chair to talk with him. I didn't eat that day. I had just lost my son. I had no one to turn to, nowhere else to go.

If there is anything that has always given me the strength to go on through the hardest of times it is music and literature. In Dylan Thomas' writings I found both. He has been a source of great happiness and solace. For many people Christmas is more a time of suffering than joy. Christ often gets somehow forgotten in the mix. At a time of year when everyone is expected to be happy and joyous, filled with good cheer and charity, many find themselves truly alone. If they do then I hope they will have something, if not someone, that gives them the strength to endure the pain and to see the beauty of the world anew. Dylan Thomas has the ability to touch the core of people, to bring people to the light from darkness. In that spirit I humbly offer this Christmas gift. This story is about a Christmas he only imagined. Yet, it illustrates the power of the imagination to touch and heal the lives of others. Writers frequently sacrifice themselves so that their experience, and the retelling of it, may save others. This great and compassionate poet was, in my opinion, a Holy man. Intoxicated more by language than drink, he sought to heal and bless us all. Happy Christmas!

Karl Orend
Toronto

A Child's Christmas in Wales



Dylan's work table in his writing shed, 'his slant, racking house/And the hewn coils of his trade.'

One Christmas was so much like another, in those years around the sea-town corner now and out of all sound except the distant speaking of the voices I sometimes hear a moment before sleep, that I can never remember whether it snowed for six days and six nights when I was twelve or whether it snowed for twelve days and twelve nights when I was six.

All the Christmases roll down toward the two-tongued sea, like a cold and headlong moon bundling down the sky that was our street; and they stop at the rim of the ice-edged, fish-freezing waves, and I plunge my hands in the snow and bring out whatever I can find. In goes my hand into that wool-white bell-tongued ball of holidays resting at the rim of the carol-singing sea, and out come Mrs. Prothero and the firemen.

It was on the afternoon of the day of Christmas Eve, and I was in Mrs. Prothero's garden, waiting for cats, with her son Jim. It was snowing. It was always snowing at Christmas. December, in my memory, is white as Lapland, though there were no reindeers. But there were cats. Patient, cold and callous, our hands wrapped in socks, we waited to snowball the cats. Sleek and long as jaguars and horrible-whiskered, spitting and snarling, they would slink and sidle over the white back-garden walls, and the lynx-eyed hunters, Jim and I, fur-capped and moccasined trappers from Hudson Bay, off Mumbles Road, would hurl our deadly snowballs at the green of their eyes.

The wise cats never appeared. We were so still, Eskimo-footed arctic marksmen in the muffling silence of the eternal snows—eternal, ever since Wednesday—that we never heard Mrs. Prothero's first cry from her igloo at the bottom of the garden. Or, if we heard it at all, it was, to us, like the far-off challenge of our enemy and prey, the neighbour's polar cat. But soon the voice grew louder. 'Fire!' cried Mrs. Prothero, and she beat the dinner-gong.

And we ran down the garden, with the snowballs in our arms, toward the house; and smoke, indeed, was pouring out of the dining-room, and the gong was bombilating, and Mrs. Prothero was announcing ruin like a town crier in Pompeii. This was better than all the cats in Wales standing on the wall in a row. We bounded into the house, laden with snowballs, and stopped at the open door of the smoke-filled room.

Something was burning all right; perhaps it was Mr. Prothero, who always slept there after midday dinner with a newspaper over his face. But he was standing in the middle of the room, saying, 'A fine Christmas!' and smacking at the smoke with a slipper. 'Call the fire brigade,' cried Mrs. Prothero as she beat the gong.

'They won't be there,' said Mr. Prothero, 'it's Christmas.'

There was no fire to be seen, only clouds of smoke and Mr. Prothero standing in the middle of them, waving his slipper as though he were conducting.

'Do something,' he said.

And we threw all our snowballs into the smoke—I think we missed Mr. Prothero—and ran out of the house to the telephone box.

'Let's call the police as well,' Jim said.

'And the ambulance.'

'And Ernie Jenkins, he likes fires.'

But we only called the fire brigade, and soon the fire engine came and three tall men in helmets brought a hose into the house and Mr. Prothero got out just in time before they turned it on. Nobody could have had a noisier Christmas Eve. And when the firemen turned off the hose and were standing in the wet, smoky room, Jim's aunt, Miss Prothero, came downstairs and peered in at them. Jim and I waited, very quietly, to hear what she would say to them. She said the right thing, always. She looked at the three tall firemen in their shining helmets, standing among the smoke and cinders and dissolving snowballs, and she said: 'Would you like anything to read?'

Years and years and years ago, when I was a boy, when there were wolves in Wales, and birds the colour of red-flannel petticoats whisked past the harp-shaped hills, when we sang and wallowed all night and day in caves that smelt like Sunday afternoons in damp front farmhouse parlours, and we chased, with the jawbones of deacons, the English and the bears, before the motor-car, before the wheel, before the duchess-faced horse, when we rode the daft and happy hills bareback, it snowed and it snowed. But here a small boy says: 'It snowed last year, too. I made a snowman and

my brother knocked it down and I knocked my brother down and then we had tea.'

'But that was not the same snow,' I say. 'Our snow was not only shaken from whitewash buckets down the sky, it came shawling out of the ground and swam and drifted out of the arms and hands and bodies of the trees; snow grew overnight on the roofs of the houses like a pure and grandfather moss, minutely white-ivied the walls and settled on the postman, opening the gate, like a dumb, numb thunderstorm of white, torn Christmas cards.'

'Were there postmen then, too?'

'With sprinkling eyes and wind-cherried noses, on spread, frozen feet they crunched up to the doors and mittened on them manfully. But all that the children could hear was a ringing of bells'

'You mean that the postman went rat-a-tat-tat and the doors rang?'

'I mean that the bells that the children could hear were inside them'

'I only hear thunder sometimes, never bells.'

'There were church bells, too.'

'Inside them?'

'No, no, no, in the bat-black, snow-white belfries, tugged by bishops and storks. And they rang their tidings over the bandaged town, over the frozen foam of the powder and ice-cream hills, over the crackling sea. It

seemed that all the churches boomed for joy under my window; and the weathercocks crew for Christmas, on our fence.'

'Get back to the postmen.'

'They were just ordinary postmen, fond of walking and dogs and Christmas and the snow. They knocked on the doors with blue knuckles....'

'Ours has got a black knocker....'

'And then they stood on the white Welcome mat in the little, drifted porches and huffed and puffed, making ghosts with their breath, and jogged from foot to foot like small boys wanting to go out.

'And then the Presents?'

'And then the Presents, after the Christmas box. And the cold postman, with a rose on his button-nose, tingled down the tea-tray-slithered run of the chilly glinting hill. He went in his ice-bound boots like a man on fishmonger's slabs. He wagged his bag like a frozen camel's hump, dizzily turned the corner on one foot, and, by God, he was gone.'

'Get back to the Presents.'

'There were the Useful Presents: engulfing mufflers of the old coach days, and mittens made for giant sloths; zebra scarfs of a substance like silky gum that could be tug-o'-warred down to the galoshes; blinding tam-o'-shanters like patchwork tea cosies and bunny-suited busbies and balaclavas for victims of head-shrinking tribes; from aunts who always wore wool next to the skin there were moustached and rasping vests that made you wonder why the aunts had any skin left at all; and once I had a little crocheted nose bag from an aunt now, alas, no longer whinnying with us. And pictureless books in which small boys, though warned with

quotations not to, would skate on Farmer Giles' pond and did and drowned; and books that told me everything about the wasp, except why.'

'Go on to the Useless Presents.'

'Bags of moist and many-coloured jelly babies and a folded flag and a false nose and a tram-conductor's cap and a machine that punched tickets and rang a bell; never a catapult; once, by mistake that no one could explain, a little hatchet; and a celluloid duck that made, when you pressed it, a most unducklike sound, a mewing moo that an ambitious cat might make who wished to be a cow; and a painting book in which I could make the grass, the trees, the sea and the animals any colour I pleased, and still the dazzling sky-blue sheep are grazing in the red field under the rainbow-billed and pea-green birds.

'Hardboileds, toffee, fudge and allsorts, crunches, cracknels, humbugs, glaciers, marzipan, and butterwelsh for the Welsh. And troops of bright tin soldiers who, if they could not fight, could always run. And Snakes-and-Families and Happy Ladders. And Easy Hobbi-Games for Little Engineers, complete with instructions.

'Oh, easy for Leonardo! And a whistle to make the dogs bark to wake up the old man next door to make him beat on the wall with his stick to shake our picture off the wall.

'And a packet of cigarettes: you put one in your mouth and you stood at the corner of the street and you waited for hours, in vain, for an old lady to scold you for smoking a cigarette, and then with a smirk you ate it. And then it was breakfast under the balloons.'

'Were there Uncles like in our house?'

'There are always Uncles at Christmas.

'The same Uncles. And on Christmas mornings, with dog-disturbing whistle and sugar fags, I would scour the swatched town for the news of the little world, and find always a dead bird by the white Post Office or by the deserted swings; perhaps a robin, all but one of his fires out. Men and women wading or scooping back from chapel, with taproom noses and wind-bussed cheeks, all albinos, huddled their stiff black jarring feathers against the irreligious snow.

'Mistletoe hung from the gas brackets in all the front parlours; there was sherry and walnuts and bottled beer and crackers by the dessertspoons; and cats in their fur-abouts watched the fires; and the high-heaped fire spat, all ready for the chestnuts and the mulling pokers.

'Some few large men sat in the front parlours, without their collars, Uncles almost certainly, trying their new cigars, holding them out judiciously at arms' length, returning them to their mouths, coughing, then holding them out again as though waiting for the explosion; and some few small Aunts, not wanted in the kitchen, nor anywhere else for that matter, sat on the very edges of their chairs, poised and brittle, afraid to break, like faded cups and saucers.'

Not many those mornings trod the piling streets: an old man always, fawn-bowlered, yellow-gloved and, at this time of year, with spats of snow, would take his constitutional to the white bowling green and back, as he would take it wet or fine on Christmas Day or Doomsday; sometimes two hale young men, with big pipes blazing, no overcoats and wind-blown scarfs, would trudge, unspeaking, down to the forlorn sea, to work up an

appetite, to blow away the fumes, who knows, to walk into the waves until nothing of them was left but the two curling smoke clouds of their inextinguishable briars. Then I would be slap-dashing home, the gravy smell of the dinners of others, the bird smell, the brandy, the pudding and mince, coiling up to my nostrils, when out of a snow-clogged side lane would come a boy the spit of myself, with a pink-tipped cigarette and the violet past of a black eye, cocky as a bullfinch, leering all to himself.

I hated him on sight and sound, and would be about to put my dog whistle to my lips and blow him off the face of Christmas when suddenly he, with a violet wink, put his whistle to his lips and blew so stridently, so high, so exquisitely loud, that gobbling faces, their cheeks bulged with goose, would press against their tinselled windows, the whole length of the white echoing street. For dinner we had turkey and blazing pudding, and after dinner the Uncles sat in front of the fire, loosened all buttons, put their large moist hands over their watch chains, groaned a little and slept. Mothers, aunts and sisters scuttled to and fro, bearing tureens. Auntie Bessie, who had already been frightened, twice, by a clock-work mouse, whimpered at the sideboard and had some elderberry wine. The dog was sick. Auntie Dosie had to have three aspirins, but Auntie Hannah, who liked port, stood in the middle of the snowbound back yard, singing like a big-bosomed thrush. I would blow up balloons to see how big they would blow up to; and, when they burst, which they all did, the Uncles jumped and rumbled. In the rich and heavy afternoon, the Uncles breathing like dolphins and the snow descending, I would sit among festoons and Chinese lanterns and nibble dates and try to make a model man-o'-war, following the Instructions for Little Engineers, and produce what might be mistaken for a sea-going tramcar.

Or I would go out, my bright new boots squeaking, into the white world, on to the seaward hill, to call on Jim and Dan and Jack and to pad through the still streets, leaving huge deep footprints on the hidden pavements.

'I bet people will think there's been hippos.'

'What would you do if you saw a hippo coming down our street?'

'I'd go like this, bang! I'd throw him over the railings and roll him down the hill and then I'd tickle him under the ear and he'd wag his tail.'

'What would you do if you saw two hippos?'

Iron-flanked and bellowing he-hippos clanked and battered through the scudding snow toward us as we passed Mr. Daniel's house.

'Let's post Mr. Daniel a snowball through his letter-box.' `Let's write things in the snow.'

'Let's write, "Mr. Daniel looks like a spaniel" all over his lawn.'

Or we walked on the white shore.

'Can the fishes see it's snowing?'

The silent one-clouded heavens drifted on to the sea. Now we were snow-blind travellers lost on the north hills, and vast dewlapped dogs, with flasks round their necks, ambled and shambled up to us, baying "Excelsior". We returned home through the poor streets where only a few children fumbled with bare red fingers in the wheel-rutted snow and cat-called after us, their voices fading away, as we trudged uphill, into the cries

of the dock birds and the hooting of ships out in the whirling bay. And then, at tea the recovered Uncles would be jolly; and the ice cake loomed in the centre of the table like a marble grave. Auntie Hannah laced her tea with rum, because it was only once a year.

Bring out the tall tales now that we told by the fire as the gaslight bubbled like a diver. Ghosts whooed like owls in the long nights when I dared not look over my shoulder; animals lurked in the cubbyhole under the stairs where the gas meter ticked. And I remember that we went singing carols once, when there wasn't the shaving of a moon to light the flying streets. At the end of a long road was a drive that led to a large house, and we stumbled up the darkness of the drive that night, each one of us afraid, each one holding a stone in his hand in case, and all of us too brave to say a word. The wind through the trees made noises as of old and unpleasant and maybe webfooted men wheezing in caves. We reached the black bulk of the house.

'What shall we give them? "Hark the Herald"?'

'No,' Jack said, "Good King Wenceslas". I'll count three.'

One, two, three, and we began to sing, our voices high and seemingly distant in the snow-felled darkness round the house that was occupied by nobody we knew. We stood close together, near the dark door.

Good King Wenceslas looked out
On the Feast of Stephen ...

And then a small, dry voice, like the voice of someone who has not spoken for a long time, joined our singing: a small, dry, eggshell voice from the other side of the door: a small dry voice through the keyhole. And when we stopped running we were outside our house; the front room was lovely; balloons floated under the hot-water-bottle-gulping gas; everything was good again and shone over the town.

'Perhaps it was a ghost,' Jim said.

'Perhaps it was trolls,' Dan said, who was always reading. 'Let's go in and see if there's any jelly left,' Jack said. And we did that.

Always on Christmas night there was music. An uncle played the fiddle, a cousin sang 'Cherry Ripe', and another uncle sang 'Drake's Drum'. It was very warm in the little house.

Auntie Hannah, who had got on to the parsnip wine, sang a song about Bleeding Hearts and Death, and then another in which she said her heart was like a Bird's Nest; and then everybody laughed again; and then I went to bed. Looking through my bedroom window, out into the moonlight and the unending smoke-coloured snow, I could see the lights in the windows of all the other houses on our hill and hear the music rising from them up the long, steadily falling night. I turned the gas down, I got into bed. I said some words to the close and holy darkness, and then I slept.

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This edition of Dylan Thomas' A Child's Christmas in Wales is published in Toronto, Canada, by Editions Carrefour Alyscamps, as a Christmas gift to friends of Alyscamps Press, Paris. It is not for circulation outside of Canada and is not for sale.

This edition is limited to twenty-five numbered copies signed by the publisher.

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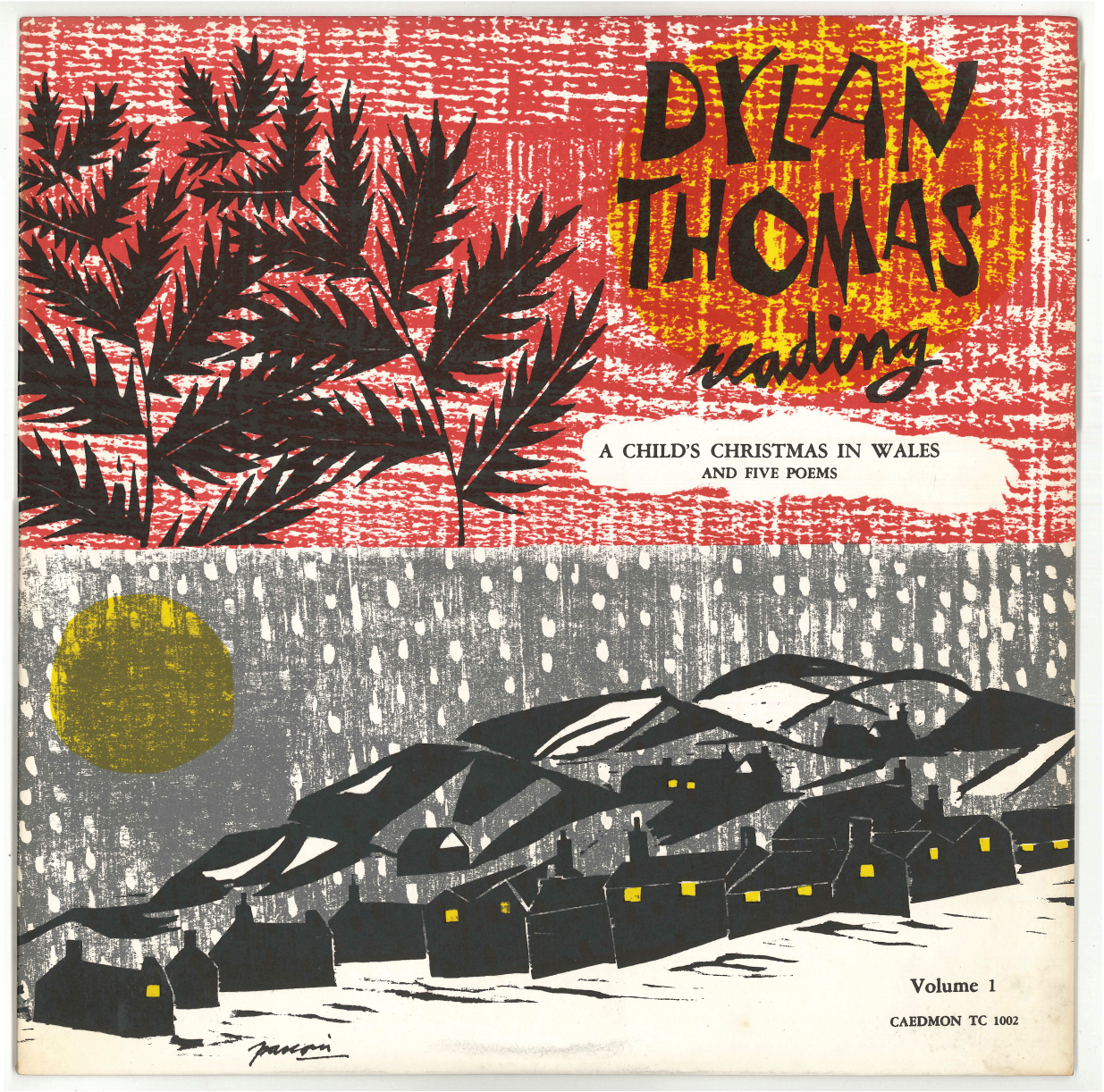

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